

St. Vincent's Cemetery (Clifton Graveyard) 1974

by May Lane

In February or March 1974, I was 11 years old; my sister Fran was 9, and our friend Lester, 10. It had snowed during the night, school was canceled, and a day of sledding was in order. Herring Run Park was crowded with kids, so we decided to go to the Clifton Golf course. We sledged down one of the hills that faced a smaller hill with the fairway in between. We could see some tombstones sticking up through the brush on the opposite hill and wondered if it was the infamous Clifton Graveyard (St. Vincent's Cemetery) we'd heard about. We decided to investigate.

Walking into the brush, we immediately encountered some small tombstones. I distinctly remembered seeing several that were low to the ground with a sleeping infant or sleeping lamb on top. We thought these were probably graves for infants. Further up the hill, we found several broken or toppled tombstones. Finally, at the top of the hill we encountered the mausolea. I don't remember how many were there, but I do remember that they had been opened, the shelves were empty, beer cans littered the floor, and there was graffiti written on the walls. This was the first time I had seen a mausoleum. Outside one mausoleum lay a lidless coffin that appeared rusted and was badly beaten up—like the one in the photo on the group site. It looked like it had been burned. There was nothing inside it. Lester went over to the coffin and as he did, he tripped over something. I looked down at what at first I thought was a tree branch, but upon further observation, saw two shoeless feet and yelled, "It's a body!" Lester had tripped over this man's legs.

At this point, I think we were all in shock about what we were seeing. This poor man was headless and his body had been burned. He was missing his pants, and his bow tie and black suit jacket were tattered (I think he was wearing a tuxedo). He was missing his left lower arm, his humerus bone showing. The other arm was fully intact and his hand lay across his sternum. He was perfectly stiff and his leathery, browned skin made him look mummified. Obviously he had been dead a long time. I'm guessing he was about 5' 5", not very tall. On the mausoleum that we assumed was his was the date 1920 above the door. I think there were four shelves in it. We were very scared and said a prayer for him.

Lester's dad was a Lutheran minister, so we trekked back to Lester's house, got his dad and brought him to the graveyard. He was very solemn and disgusted by what he saw, and told us that this was wrong and that people need to respect the dead. We went back to Les' house, his dad called the police and WBAL Action News. The three of us were told to meet the police and the news reporter there. I think the reporter arrived before the police did. He filmed the area, the mausoleum, and the three of us throwing snowballs. He did not film the body. Then the police arrived. One of the officers put the body on a metal grid that was nearby and tried to put the body back in the mausoleum. He said "The Lord forgive me for what I'm gonna do." (I can still hear his voice and Baltimore accent quite distinctly). Why he tried to put this gentleman back in the mausoleum didn't make sense to us and he did a terrible job of it! The doorway was narrow and

he jockeyed the body in laying him in vertically, upside down, on his neck, leaning against one of the shelves! The officer washed his hands off in the snow.

Then, Fr. Lawrence arrived. The same Fr. Lawrence who is still pastor at St. Vincent's. He asked the three of us, "Is this how you found him?" We told him we found him on the ground and that the police officer put him in there like that. The officer quickly replied, "I'm sorry but, that's the best I could do." He was genuine in his response. Fr. Lawrence said that he'd have to open up another grave and lay the man in there. At some point, we learned that the gentleman's name was Vincent, but I don't know if we were told that or that we heard someone say the name of the cemetery. That part is unclear. We do know he was Italian and I think his last name began with the letter "R".

As Fr. Lawrence led the police through the brush to another grave, we were told to go home. We never saw Fr. Lawrence open a new grave and we have no idea which grave he chose or how he chose it.

The story was on Action News that night. I don't remember much of anything with regard to the newscast. I think Fran and I were more interested in seeing ourselves on TV. I do remember anchorman Ron Smith beginning the story with the words "Three juveniles found a body today..."

Fran and I shared a bedroom but we were still nervous about turning off the light and going to sleep. Poor Fran woke up crying. My mom ended up sleeping with Fran in her bed. To this day, Fran still has dreams about "Vincent". If she's dreaming about being in the woods, for example, she'll see him, just like we found him! Interesting.

Fran and I attended Seton High School, an all girls Catholic school. Every other Wednesday, we would have mass in the chapel with a visiting priest. It was optional to attend. One Wednesday I was sick and stayed home from school. When Fran came home, she said, "Guess who was the priest at mass today?" It was Fr. Lawrence. She recognized him right away. That was 1979 or 1980.

For years, Fran and I wanted to go to St. Vincent's Church to talk to Fr. Lawrence about our experience to see what he remembered, but we never did. When the Internet came about, she and I started researching St. Vincent's cemetery. There was nothing on it until that 2001 City Paper article that I've posted to our yahoo group. So....there it is.

Other information: there was a teen-aged/early 20's young man in my neighborhood who drove a very decked-out car (I think it was purple), and in the back window, he had a pink shag rug, a few other items, and a skull that faced outward. The skull was tanned and looked old. I remember someone saying that he got the skull from Clifton graveyard. I was about 8 years old at the time.

One of the older boys who lived three houses down brought home a hand from the cemetery. I never saw it. His brother told me this story several years ago.